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“All Right, Then, I’ll Go to Hell!”: Common Sense and *Sensus Communis* in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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"All Right, Then, I'll Go to Hell!": Common Sense and *Sensus Communis*[1] in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

That which is hateful to you, do not do to another. That is the whole of the Law (Torah); the rest is explanation. Go and learn.

—HILLEL[2]

If only one character in all of American literature had a lick of common sense, it would easily be Mark Twain's most beloved, iconic, and controversial creation—the feral, backwoods adolescent Huckleberry Finn. Billed as "Tom Sawyer's comrade," Huck Finn was first introduced to readers in chapter six of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as "the juvenile pariah of the village… son of the town drunkard… cordially hated and dreaded by all the mothers of the town, because he was idle, and lawless, and vulgar and bad—and because all their children admired him so…"[3] Huck Finn likes to smoke and cuss; he dislikes fine clothing and Bible study and prefers his food all cooked together so that "things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and the things go better."[4] He is a lover of nature and distrusts all things 'sivilized'—religion, education, money, and above all, grown-ups, who demonstrate to Huck time and time again that there are absolutely no limits to what people will do for money.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has rankled the sensibilities of "respectable" readers since its debut in 1885, not because of the sheer volume of cruel and depraved acts that Huck bears witness to, but because the target of its satire is precisely the polite society so offended by it. Published by a shell company operated by Twain's nephew,[5] *Huck Finn* has been enraging audiences from the very beginning, starting with the Concord Public Library famously banning the book right from the outset for its "coarse language" and "irreligious" themes. Considered crude, vulgar, and offensive in its time, *Huck Finn* was a wild success, as Twain himself predicted it would be. "They have expelled Huck from their library as 'trash and suitable only for the slums,'" he wrote the same nephew that year: "That will sell 25,000 copies for us sure."[6] Of course, Twain's *magnum opus* is still considered crude, vulgar, and offensive in our time, but from an entirely upended perspective. Easily identifiable as a work of

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[1] Latin *sensus communis,* best translated as "communal sense" or "sense of the community," refers not merely to the norms and judgments shared by members of a society, but to the assumptions each individual expects all others to hold as well. It is the substrate of mutual intelligibility—the background consensus presumed in public life. See Oliver, *Judgment, Trust, and Common Sense: Essays on Making Sense of Things* (Gentry, AR: Common Sense Communications, LLC, 2024), chap. 1, "*De Sensus Communis*: What 'Everybody Knows."

[2] Talmud, Shabbat 31a. See Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, Koren-Steinsaltz Talmud, 1965—.

[3] Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, edited by Beverly Lyon Clark, W.W. Norton & Co., p. 40.

[4] Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* edited by Victor Fischer, Harriet Elinor Smith, et. al. University of California Press, 2010.

[5] See *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, vol. 2, ed. Harriet E. Smith, Victor Fischer, et al. (University of California Press, 2013), 57-59.

[6] Ibid.

antiracist satire by the standards of its own time (an inflammatory achievement in its own right), many readers in the 21st century find themselves deeply uncomfortable with, if not pained by, its liberal deployment of racist language and demeaning stereotypes. As such, teaching *Huckleberry Finn* to any group of students in the present day is difficult—and possibly injudicious, depending on the approach taken—to the extent that many faculty and administrators find it better to just avoid it altogether.

And this is deeply regrettable, for despite the novel's problematic complexities, *Huckleberry Finn*'s general exclusion from the classroom is a huge loss to American literary education, particularly vis-à-vis the study of common sense. For, satire that it is, *Huckleberry Finn*'s entire project is to hold up the *sensus communis* of the American South[7] for sustained examination while mapping it against the day-to-day experiences of those who inhabited it, not only in 1885 but in the centuries that followed. He does so through the eyes of a dispossessed adolescent who, through the central conceit of being "accepted" into Tom Sawyer's family—his proxy "acceptance" into proper society—is able to engage in powerful criticisms of race and class simply by viewing this world from the perspective of someone as low in the social order as he is.

Another problem in dealing with *Huck Finn* is that it is messy. It is far from an easily categorized narrative that fits neatly within any of its contemporaneous worldviews. This can come as a surprise to a first-time reader who, expecting a straightforward, traditionally structured children's narrative, instead finds a meandering exploration of the human condition, class, race, society, and moral responsibility, while also veering off into both comic vignettes and tragic episodes from the perspective of a child who, though wise beyond his years, is still just a boy. To the adolescent reader, Twain's story is a knowing wink from the one adult in the room who subtly signals that they are not wrong to wonder if something is dreadfully wrong with grown-up affairs; to the adult reader (which, in the context of Twain's contemporaneous audiences, mostly meant white American—specifically Southern—men), it is a prompt to ask oneself, in a very concrete and practical sense, how—or even if—one can live a life that is not fundamentally amoral while simultaneously participating, at any level, in a society whose entire economy, culture, and infrastructure is built on a foundation of brutality and violent exploitation.

Like its subject matter, *Huck Finn* is full of contradictions and is *not* intended to be taken as a clean-cut "theoretical" text with a consistent, discernable interpretation. It not only violates the Aristotelian ideals of the unified whole[8] at every turn, but it actively instructs the reader to think outside of them. At the time of writing *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain was an experienced literary figure at the

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[7] The opening of the novel is set in Missouri, which can open debates regarding its classification as part of the Southern United States. While Missouri's position was and still is liminal, certain historical contexts should be acknowledged. Missouri was a slave state, occupied an important geographical at the nexus of the Mississippi River and the frontier, and was home to many Confederate sympathizers. But Missouri did not secede from the Union. Combine this with the fact that Jim and Huck's journey is predominantly downriver, the collective sentiment portrayed in the novel can be confidently characterized as quintessentially Southern.

[8] The principles discussed pertain predominantly to tragedy, as evidenced by the extant sections of Aristotle's "Poetics." Cf. Aristotle, *XXIII Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932). It remains speculative, however, if his hypothesized treatise on comedy — which has unfortunately been lost to history — might have posited that the essence of comedy is rooted in chaos, drawing parallels to the anarchic comedy of the Marx Brothers or Bugs Bunny.

height of his powers who, having already found success and fame by the time of writing his magnum opus, was unusually well-versed in the art of fielding audience expectations, reactions, and prejudices. As such, he knew perfectly well that he could not trust readers to see what he doing in such a complex satire parading as children's literature. Furthermore, Twain knew that some readers simply have neither an ear nor an eye for irony. Therefore, Twain clearly communicates to his reader in the "NOTICE" that precedes the narrative by invoking a tactic that, by 1885, was very well known to the average white man in the South—he threatens them:

NOTICE

Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.

BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR
PER G. G., CHIEF OF ORDNANCE[9]

Twain's draconian "NOTICE" is more than a grim joke to set the mood, although it does that reasonably well. Instead, by rather firmly directing the reader *not* to rely on commonplace tropes for interpreting the novel, Twain forces us to ask questions about what the purpose of the work could be in its stead. Does he mean there is no motive, moral, or plot within its pages, or is this simply another ironic wink? Is he suggesting the reader is endangering themselves by thinking too much about what they are about to read? In Twain's world, both interpretations might be valid: it is difficult to articulate any workable moral theory in a society that allows slavery, and questioning authority or hierarchy in the antebellum South was indeed punishable by corporal methods, regardless of race.[10] In any case, it is clear from this notice that Twain is deliberately signaling to the reader that what follows is not a conventional narrative. Attempts to interpret it as such are not just wrong-headed, but dangerous.

So, what is Twain's purpose in composing *Huck Finn* as he did? His primary purpose is to construct a satire of the highest order. A 'sequel' of sorts to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*—a third-person narrative of a conventional adventure story—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is narrated from the first-person perspective of the first novel's sidekick, a barely literate child living on the very edges of society. Satire is among the most delicate of genres, juggling the subtle distinctions between parody, homage, and insult without fully committing to anyone. But this is not just any satire—it is distinctly

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[9] It has been remarked that the martial tone of the book's "NOTICE" would have been recognizable to white southerners as reminiscent of the many such notices forbidding uncondoned activity on pain of punishment. These were usually "signed" by a military officer and were common throughout the South during Reconstruction, when northern troops still occupied much of the former Confederacy (see Victor Doyno, "Presentations of Violence in 'Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," *Mark Twain Annual*, no. 2, 2004, p. 76).

[44] The network of laws and punishments under this heading could comprise, in effect, a practical outlining of the *sensus communis* of the American antebellum South, as enforced by a pervasive system of punishments intendent to maintain the institutions of slavery.

American, directly confronting the nation's cardinal sin and the foundation of its outsized prosperity: the brutal practice of chattel slavery.

Another purpose Twain clearly has in mind is to imagine a space for meaningful conversation between black and white people in the antebellum South. As a thought experiment, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* postulates a scenario that would have been all but impossible in the South of Twain's upbringing—what would happen if a twelve-year-old white boy and a runaway black man were given the space to talk freely with one another? What would they talk about? How would they understand their relationship to one another without the gaze of white, slave-owning society constantly upon them, sizing them up for judgment and punishment? Outside of social expectations, each sees the other as a friend. While both are unmoored from their "place" in society with no intent of returning, Twain further equalizes Jim and Huck by drawing them nearer to one another in the social hierarchy. Jim is held in high regard among his fellow slaves for his escapades with witches to the point of pride ("Jim was monstrous proud about it, and he got so he wouldn't hardly notice the other n—rs. N—rs would come miles to hear Jim tell about it, and he was more looked up to than any n—r in that country"[11]), while Huck, poor white trash that he is, is about as low in the social order that a white person can be—and a child, to boot. By placing Huck and Jim as close to one another in the social hierarchy as a black person and white person can be—and then allowing them the space to consciously reject that hierarchy without fear—Twain creates the space for the kinds of critical conversations that social justice advocates so often call for. The irony that Twain observed, of course, is that such critical conversations can rarely take place in the formal proceedings of a conference: they unfold on the river and beneath the stars.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is all at once—depending on who one asks—a picaresque coming-of-age tale, an antislavery narrative, a blistering satire, a racist screed, a sociopolitical allegory concerning the failure of Reconstruction, a blasphemous heresy, a runaway bestseller, or even a so-called "Great American Novel." First and foremost, however, it is a children's book. Like Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a work of "children's" literature that is accessible early in life and only grows richer with age and reflection. Huck's tone may be light and cavalier a good portion of the time, but his predicament is constantly one that is fraught on all sides with profound peril. "By & by I shall take a boy of twelve & run him on through life (in the first person) but not Tom Sawyer—he would not be a good character for it," Twain wrote to W.D. Howells in 1876.[12] If by "run him on through life," Twain meant to subject him to an infinite variety of horrors on a grueling and hopeless journey to nowhere, he could not have succeeded more brilliantly than he did with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Why it could not have been Tom Sawyer will become clear as we proceed, but it is enough at this point to say that only a child with quick wits and good judgment—which is to say, with common sense—could survive any one of life-threatening situations Huck faces throughout the novel, let alone all of them.

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[11] *HF* 7-8.

[12] Mark Twain-Howells Letters: The Correspondence of Samuel L. Clemens and William D. Howells, edited by Henry Nash Smith, Harvard University Press, 1960, vol. 1, pp. 91-92.

Being "Sivilized": *Sensus Communis* in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Huckleberry Finn is taken here as the preeminent text on what it means (and why it is important) **to *question* the *sensus communis*** up to and including the consideration of whether it must be rejected altogether. The core tension, as presented early in the novel, is that between the backwoods Huckleberry Finn and the fine surroundings he finds himself in at the novel's outset. Huck, who until his recent escapades with Tom Sawyer resulted in a sudden elevation in social status, had slept in a sugar-hogshead[13] and lived off the land. Now, he finds himself almost literally trapped among the material details of fine living as he attempts to navigate life in the Widow Douglas's household. The widow has a lot of rules, mostly all having to do with communal notions of what is and is not proper. Propriety is what matters in the South. Those who are proper treasure their elite status; those who are not either long for it or consign themselves to a "low-down and ornery" standard of living (see Pap, Boggs, the Arkansaw chaw-swappers, the king and the duke, and more).

Huck, being of the "low-down and ornery" stock, has not been brought up in the ways of the upper-crust St. Petersburg society. As a foil to Tom Sawyer, who is deeply entrenched in the *sensus communis* of his upbringing, Huck is unburdened by expectations of propriety, which allows him to view societal norms with a critical eye. In material terms, Huck's background is very different from Tom's—he is not just poor but impoverished. He is only barely above a free black man in terms of social standing: his youth places him even further down the social ranks that even adult white trash, but even as child, Huck's social rank outstrips Jim's simply by being a white. Yet unlike those around him, Huck has little interest in—if not outright disdain for—the fundamental pillars of Southern gentility: religion, schooling, and money.

No cultural institution in the South is more important than the Christian religion. Likewise, landed interests in the antebellum South had to "reconcile" the teachings of Jesus with the institution of slavery. Thus, the pulpit served as a powerful platform for the propagation of a racial hierarchy

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[13] A large barrel used for shipping raw goods. The parallel to Diogenes of Sinope cannot be overstated; the eminent pre-Socratic philosopher and principal founder of cynicism as a philosophical school was famed for his disdain of contemporary mores, arbitrary customs, material wealth, and social propriety. He was famous for taking shelter in a large clay wine jar in the Acropolis and for expressing contempt at convention. He was possibly a fugitive, as well; his father, Hicesias, was a banker who became embroiled in a currency debasement scandal that saw him and his son exiled from Sinope and stripped of their possessions. It is not known if Diogenes was an accomplice in his father's scheme, but he rejected the idea of money for the rest of his life. His meeting with Alexander the Great was memorialized thusly by Plutarch: XIV. A conference of Greeks was held at the Isthmus of Corinth, and it was decided to join Alexander in his expedition against the Persians. The King was appointed commander-in-chief. Many statesmen and philosophers waited upon him to tender their congratulations, and Alexander expected that Diogenes of Sinope, who was staying at Corinth, would do the same. Since, however, that remarkable philosopher, taking very small account of Alexander, remained quietly in the Craneium, the King went in person to see him. Diogenes happened to be lying in the sunshine, and when he saw so great a crowd approaching sat up a little and stared at Alexander. The King greeted him and addressed him, inquiring if he had need of anything. "Just stand a little out of the sunshine," replied Diogenes. Alexander, it is said, was so impressed by this reply, and so filled with admiration at the contemptuous manner in which he had been treated, and at the magnanimity of the philosopher, that, as they went away and his courtiers were laughing and jesting over the circumstance, he remarked: "Seriously, if I were not Alexander, I would have been Diogenes." See Plutarch, *The Life of Alexander*, translated by W.R. Frazer. Loeb Classical Library, volume 7, 1919, 16; See also William Desmond, *Cynics*. University of California Press, 2008, 21.

undergirded by a selective interpretation of Christian scripture. Sermons of the time often sought to "reconcile" the moral dissonance between the Christian ideals of love and equality and the brutal reality of slavery, but in practice this "reconciliation" simply meant justifying the practice to parishioners, week after week, from the pulpit. Certain Bible passages that "condone" the practice were emphasized, including Ephesians 6:5 ("Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ)" and Titus 2:9-10 ("Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.")

These sermons, steeped in this interpretive tradition, served to assuage the moral qualms of the white populace, offering a comforting narrative that slavery was not a product of human greed or cruelty but a divine decree, a part of the natural order ordained by God Himself. This narrative was so pervasive that it seeped into the familial sphere, shaping the beliefs of generations. Huck, having not been brought up in a family of social import and, therefore, unchurched, is learning much of the scripture at an age where he has developed some critical faculties. He is also suspicious of religion, if not quite at Twain's level of cynicism on the subject. He is not interested in scripture and does not see its relevance to his own life:

> After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers, and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by and by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him, because I don't take no stock in dead people.[14]

Huck's skepticism also extends to the efficacy of prayer. He retreats into the woods to contemplate the disparity between the promises of prayer and the harsh realities of life. He questions why prayer doesn't seem to solve tangible problems. The widow's explanation that prayer yields "spiritual gifts" only confounds Huck further. He is told that he must help others, prioritize their needs over his own—a concept whose advantage he struggles to see, except for the benefit of others. This does not satisfy Huck—even though, ironically, it is the very moral instruction he follows later in the novel when he decides he would sooner risk hellfire than betray Jim. At this point in the novel, however, Huck is willing to push back, again revealing his disregard for status and propriety. This scene illustrates Huck's inclination towards reflection, a trait not commonly found among Southern children (or adults) of his time. A child raised in a more conventional setting might not question the concept of prayer so openly, being aware of the potential repercussions of challenging adult authority. Huck, however, having endured harsher punishments from his father and feeling less attached to the widow's world, is more willing to push back. He views prayer as a transaction, questioning who truly benefits from each request. This act of reflection, of "looking back" on what he has been taught and applying logic and personal experience, leads him to dismiss prayer as either nonsense, useless, or both.

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[14] *HF* 2.

Huck Finn does not hold formal education in particularly high regard, either, but he does not scorn it. He is impatient with book learning more than he is outright dismissive of it, preferring instead to focus on the realities of his situation than on theoretical assumptions. For instance, help grows annoyed when Tom Sawyer concocts his convoluted schemes that he learned about books, whether that be forming a band of robbers or orchestrating Jim's escape and the novels closing chapters. Huck finds these schemes impractical and divorced from reality. Among the "low down and ornery" class of outcasts that Huck comes from, education is often seen as a liability and pretense rather than an asset. Pap is particularly disdainful of Huck's education, accusing him of putting on airs and thinking himself as superior to his father and, likewise, his lineage. Pap views Huck's education as a threat and an insult that undermines his standing as patriarch of the Finn family, such as it is, among the uneducated peers who might share pap's attitudes toward social mobility. He berates what he sees as Huck's pretense of being above his station, saying he had "put on considerable many frills since [he had] ben away. I'll take you down a peg before I get done with you."[15] Demanding to know who had told Huck that he might "meddle in such hifalut'n foolishness," Huck tells his father that it was the widow Douglas who had seen to his education. Enraged at being subverted—and by a woman, no less—Pap assures Huck that he will "learn her to meddle." He then orders Huck to abandon on his education, effectively reminding him to remember his place in society and within the Finn family hierarchy.

Hucks disdain for schooling, however, does not belie a foolish mind. At several junctures Huck is forced to rely on his wits first and foremost to advance his journey or even survive his predicament. Significantly, when Huck discovers evidence of pap's return to town, he immediately puts his wits to work to protect himself and his newly acquired wealth. He quickly makes his way to Judge Thatcher's and asks him to take his entire fortune, seeking to transfer all legal ownership before pap can come to seize it for himself. While the judge initially seems puzzled by Huck's request, Huck pleads, "Please take it, and don't ask me nothing—then I won't have to tell no lies."[16] After studying him a moment, Judge Thatcher takes Huck's meaning, saying, "Oho-o! I think I see. You want to *sell* all your property to me—not give it. That's the correct idea."[17] He then writes up a contract stating that the transfer of property is in exchange for a "consideration" of $1. At this point neither Huck nor the reader has much evidence to be sure that Judge Thatcher can be trusted to sell Huck's assets back to him for the same consideration in the future, but one thing Huck *can* be sure of is that it is better to take his chances with Judge Thatcher than with pap.

Neither is Huck wanting for money, as it turns out—not anymore, anyway. Despite his impoverished background, he finds his social standing suddenly elevated due to his newfound wealth. At the outset of the novel, Huck has $6,000, accruing interest at a dollar per day. As a result of their escapades in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,* Huck and Tom have come into a small fortune of $6,000 in gold each as a reward, which Judge Thatcher invests at a rate that earns the boys "a dollar a day apiece all the year round—more than a body could tell what to do with."[18] But Huck, who now lives

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[15] *HF* 24.

[16] *HF* 19.

[17] *HF* 20.

[18] If this new wealth greatly improves Huck's options for a higher quality of life by attracting the attention of adults, also greatly complicates his relationships with the adults in his life. Huck is not just a good kid in the eyes of the widow and the judge

with the widow, has no expenses of his own and knows how to live off the land save for a few inexpensive necessities he cannot make himself—corn meal, bacon, bullets, and so on—offers no indication that he sees any real benefit in his new fortune.

Huck places a higher value on tangible items over abstract forms of wealth such as paper money or gold. The loot he collects with Jim and the fishing line he prays for hold more significance and utility to him. Interestingly, this perspective mirrors that of the wealthy class in his society, who also place greater value on tangible "items," albeit on a larger scale, referring to them as "commodities"—cotton, in particular. During this era, cash money was notoriously unstable, with its value often depreciating to the point where it was barely worth the paper it was printed on, and bank failures were a common occurrence. So, like many poor people, Huck doesn't trust money. In fact, he views it as a liability. He is keenly aware that his newfound fortune will draw the attention of his abusive, alcoholic father. His prediction becomes reality when his father appears at the Widow's house to harangue his son in the novel's early chapters:

> "Looky here—mind how you talk to me; I'm a-standing about all I can stand now—so don't gimme no sass. I've been in town two days, and I hain't heard nothing but about you bein' rich. I heard about it away down the river, too. That's why I come. You git me that money to-morrow—I want it."[19]

Even if Huck wanted to give pap the money, he knows that pap could not be trusted with it. Pap wants the money to feed his addiction. Were he to be successful in wresting it away from Huck, he would undoubtedly use it to drink himself to death within the first hundred dollars spent. Huck has his own interests to keep in mind to be sure, but it is also important for Pap's own sake that the money be out of his hands. And while Judge Thatcher might be a reliable custodian of Huck's fortune for the time being, Pap knows that as Huck's biological father, he has a legal claim to Huckleberry Finn—and his money—that will be very persuasive in court. Through Huck's narration, Twain provides an oblique overview of a legal process through which we ascertain that, while the widow Douglas sued pap for custody of Huck, the new judge, who does not know pap and is not familiar with his character, has ruled in pap's favor. We also learn that pap has sued Judge Thatcher for control of Huck's fortune, and while he admits that the judge knows all the legal ways to draw the process out almost *ad infinitum*, he is ultimately confident that the law will come down in his favor.[20] Winning custody of Huck means winning custody of everything that belongs to Huck as well.

(although they have likely convinced themselves that they have correctly judged him to be one), he is valuable in the real terms of their society. His worth, like everyone else's, is measurable in dollars. Adjusted for inflation, his net worth would be about $235,000. It is little surprise that the judge is willing to buy Huck's entire fortune for the "consideration" of $1.ndamental shifts in U.S. monetary and economic policy over the centuries make it difficult to account for true inflation over one hundred years or more, but quick estimates suggest $1 in 1845 to be valued at about $39 in 2022, with $6,000 being roughly equivalent to $235,000 in present-day buying power—more than enough to entice a no-good parent to come looking for it.

[19] *HF* 25.

[20] Ibid.

None of this, of course, would be a problem for Huck had he not come into his $6,000 fortune. Pap might have lost interest in Huck and then left him alone forever, but he is instead drawn back to kidnap and terrorize his own son for the sake of a big pile of money.

Practical Judgments as Aesthetic Judgments

Huck Finn may not have much in the way of formal education, but he is a thinker all the same. Having grown up as a single child and country outcast with no stable home life, Huck has had to spend a lot of time on his own. In a time before the clamor of media, Huck spent much of his time fishing, hunting, smoking, camping, and lounging in silence, with only the subtle sounds of nature and his own thoughts to fill his mind. His upbringing, characterized by solitude and survival, necessitated a reliance on his own judgment rather than societal norms. This is a child who has spent countless hours in silent contemplation, his mind occupied by the natural world and his own reflections, rather than the clamor of societal expectations.

As Huck is mostly on his own without adult supervision, he is required to make sense of his world on his own quickly and efficiently. He does not adhere to societal rules unless they are immediately applicable to his own life and liberty. He does not behave this way according to any ideological dissent; it is simply a necessity born from his circumstances. Huck's world is one where decisions often carry life-or-death consequences and where they leave no room for ideology. For Huck Finn, the ability to make a reflective, common-sense judgment on the fly is literally a matter of survival. What Huck realizes that those of us who think for a living typically do not is that practical judgements, however much we dress them as logical problems, are always *aesthetic* ones at their most fundamental, precisely in the normative sense that they are problems of *experience,* connected to decisions that are pervasively involved with reflective, life-affirming judgments. When Huck is faced with his most consequential decisions, his actions are guided by a reflection on the desired outcomes. These outcomes, however, are not determined arbitrarily. They are the product of a moral decision-making process, one that requires Huck to engage in deep introspection about what he considers good, asking himself, '*What is the state of affairs I wish to bring about or maintain?'* This process of deliberation is not merely a logical exercise but a profound engagement with his own aesthetic sensibilities and moral compass.

Coincidentally, as Twain was in the final stages of writing *Huckleberry Finn* in 1883, Charles Sanders Peirce was grappling with similar concepts. Peirce, after years of meticulous study, claimed to have "discovered"[21] a profound truth: the logical, which is the formal doctrine of how we ought to think if we want to arrive at the truth, is derived from the ethical. The ethical, in turn, is the study of the "ends of actions" and the "right action" we are prepared to deliberately adopt to bring about those desired ends. This ethical dimension is ultimately derived from a fundamental aesthetic judgment, a judgment concerning what is good and right based on what we generally consider to be "good," or that which we are deliberately prepared to work toward.[22] This philosophical insight illuminates the nature of Huck's critical judgments. When Huck makes decisions, he does so with desired results in mind—

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[21] See Peirce, MS L75.345, version 1.
[22] *CP* 5.130, 1903.

an aesthetic judgment of what we judge to be good. This is not to suggest that the logical or ideological should be disregarded altogether. As Peirce points out, logic is the mathematical series of rules that allow us to get from point A to point B in a consistent, non-contradictory way.

In the light of Peirce's philosophical insight, we can see that Huck's decisions, driven by a survival instinct and a desire for freedom, are not just logical or ethical choices but aesthetic judgments. These judgments, based on what Huck perceives as 'good', are made in a world that is often hostile and cruel. Cruelty is at the beating heart of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, manifesting not only in the kind of explosive, aberrant violence of an injudicious inebriate like Pap but also in the more insidious, normalized forms of cruelty that are accepted as part and parcel of "civilized" society. The institution of slavery, the casual infliction of pain on animals, and other such instances of normalized cruelty are woven into the very fabric of 19th-century American life. The characters within the novel, ancillary though they may be, reflect a community that has so thoroughly internalized this cruelty that it becomes almost invisible, except to those who are its direct victims. So pervasive is cruelty throughout the culture that it seeps into the realm of children's play; the make-believe violence that Tom Sawyer requires of his "band of robbers" is a chilling reflection of this reality of boyhood in the antebellum South:

> So Tom got out a sheet of paper that he had wrote the oath on, and read it. It swore every boy to stick to the band, and never tell any of the secrets; and if anybody done anything to any boy in the band, whichever boy was ordered to kill that person and his family must do it, and he mustn't eat and he mustn't sleep till he had killed them and hacked a cross in their breasts, which was the sign of the band. And nobody that didn't belong to the band could use that mark, and if he did he must be sued; and if he done it again he must be killed. And if anybody that belonged to the band told the secrets, he must have his throat cut, and then have his carcass burnt up and the ashes scattered all around, and his name blotted off of the list with blood and never mentioned again by the gang, but have a curse put on it and be forgot forever.
>
> Everybody said it was a real beautiful oath, and asked Tom if he got it out of his own head.[23]

If there were any doubt that Twain was preoccupied with human cruelty while writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, recollections from his *Autobiography* make the point clear. In an entry dated January 23, 1906, Twain recalls "among [his] old manuscripts one which [he] perceived about twenty-two years old" that was never printed. His own dating would place the piece's writing at around 1884, the same year Twain was finishing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Titled "The Character of Man," the piece begins:

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[23] *HF* 9-10.

> Concerning Man— he is too large a subject to be treated as a whole; so I will merely discuss a detail or two of him at this time. I desire to contemplate him from this point of view—this premiss: that he was not made for any useful purpose, for the reason that he hasn't served any; that he was most likely not made *intentionally;* and that his working himself up out of the oyster bed to his present position was probably a matter of surprise and regret to the Creator. * * * * For his history, in all climes, all ages and all circumstances, furnishes oceans and continents of proof that of all the creatures that were made he is the most detestable. Of the entire brood he is the only one—the solitary one—that possesses malice. That is the basest of all instincts, passions, vices—the most hateful. That one thing puts him below the rats, the grubs, the trichinæ. He is the only creature that inflicts pain for sport, knowing it to *be* pain. But if the cat knows she is inflicting pain when she plays with the frightened mouse, then we must make an exception here; we must grant that in one detail man is the moral peer of the cat. *All* creatures kill—there seems to be no exception; but of the whole list, man is the only one that kills for fun; he is the only one that kills in malice, the only one that kills for revenge. Also—in all the list he is the only creature that has a nasty mind.[24]

Twain's fixation on purposiveness in his view of human beings is strikingly apparent in this passage. The great ironic tragedy (or joke, depending on one's disposition) is that the discord between human beings and the rest of nature lies in the idea that they were "not made for any useful purpose," as evidenced by the fact that "[they haven't] served any; that [they were] most likely not made intentionally…" Twain suggests that this is what puts us at odds with the rest of nature, which is intricately organized so that all living things and the organic compounds they depend upon thrive to the benefit of one another. Human beings, unsurpassed in intellect and unchecked in their power, have reached a point where they need not concern themselves with the benefit of any other aspect of nature, having reduced it from a bountiful ecosystem to a merely productive dominion.

Huck and Twain share this understanding of human cruelty. Twain, having grown up amid the horrors of slavery and racial injustice, paints a vivid picture of the normalized atrocities of his time, and when Huck witnesses these injustices, his response is not one of ideological dissent, but of personal moral judgment. From a 21st century perspective, it might be easy to label Huck as a privileged member of society due to his white skin and to expect him to vocally oppose the injustices he witnesses. However, doing so would have been extremely unpopular among many other white people, some of whom have shown they are willing to commit extreme and grisly violence to reinforce their power.

The following sections explore several high-stakes practical, aesthetic judgments Huck must make over the course of the novel, fundamentally shaping the trajectory of his life and directly calling upon him to decide what is good—and, conversely, what is *not* good. These include rejecting the offer of

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[24] See Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain,* ed. Harriet Elinor Smith et al., vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 312.

affluence, permanently cutting ties with his father, placating the king and the duke, and committing to his own damnation before betraying Jim.

Rejecting Propriety

The notion of what is and is not 'proper' functions ideologically among the upper-class characters in Twain's novel to the point of absurdity. While no echelon of Southern society is exempted from his lampooning, the primary and most frequent target of Twain's barbs is the genteel white culture of the antebellum South, which predicated itself on the importance of propriety, manners, religion, and, in a step above and beyond the everyday racism of the average southerner, blood lineage and property ownership. The grand irony behind all this ostensible gentility, of course, was that it was all made possible by, and continually functioned through, intolerable brutality. The pretense of Southern hospitality is just that—a pretense—and attempting to tear it away could be very dangerous.

In Huck's experience, the absurdity of class obsession reaches its tragic apex in the generations-old Grangerford-Shepherdson feud, which Twain at first plays for laughs, but which culminates in the grisly murder of a twelve-year-old boy. At one point in his travels, Huck is taken in by the well-to-do Grangerford family, which is locked in a generations-old blood feud with another nearby aristocratic clan, the Shepherdsons. Twain describes the Grangerfords as the epitome of Southern gentility, writing:

> Col. Grangerford was a gentleman, you see. He was a gentleman all over; and so was his family. He was well born, as the saying is, and that's worth as much in a man as it is in a horse, so the Widow Douglas said, and nobody ever denied that she was of the first aristocracy in our town; and pap he always said it, too, though he warn't no more quality than a mud-cat, himself.[25]

However, it may be difficult for the reader to recognize much gentility in the Grangerfords' actions. The feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons is ostensibly about honor, yet it has persisted so long that no one remembers the original point of contention. Each family believes that the other has tarnished their honor. This, of course, reinforces the cycle of violence. The feud, driven by a misguided sense of propriety and honor, has devastating consequences, especially for the children of these families. Consider Emmeline Grangerford, whose story is a poignant example of the psychological damage inflicted by the constant presence of ongoing violence. Emmeline's life, cut short in her teens, was consumed by a morbid fascination with death, a theme that permeated her poetry and artwork.

Emmeline's artwork, as described by Huck, is a testament to her morbid preoccupations. As Huck recounts her works in Chapter 17: "One was a woman in a slim black dress...leaning pensive on a tombstone on her right elbow, under a weeping willow, and her other hand hanging down her side holding a white handkerchief and a reticule, and underneath the picture it said 'Shall I Never See Thee

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[25] *HF* 142. It is also imperative to observe the prevailing sentiment of *sensus communis*—the notion that an individual's worth is intrinsically tied to their lineage. This perspective was held in common by both the widow and pap, the two most influential adults in Huck's life, despite their markedly divergent backgrounds.

More Alas.'"[26] Another drawing depicts a young lady crying into a handkerchief with a dead bird in her other hand, titled "I Shall Never Hear Thy Sweet Chirrup More Alas." Emmeline's poetry, too, is filled with themes of death and loss, one of frequent poetic exercises being to write verses about obituaries and accidents she found in the newspaper. As he reflects on Emmeline's story and untimely death, Huck's capacity to feel for others comes to the surface.

> Poor Emmeline made poetry about all the dead people when she was alive, and it didn't seem right that there warn't nobody to make some about her now she was gone; so I tried to sweat out a verse or two myself, but I couldn't seem to make it go somehow.[27]

Emmeline's death also serves as an ominous foreshadowing of her brother's impending death at the hands of the Shepherdsons. Buck Grangerford's death, which Huck witnesses, is another tragic consequence of the feud. Despite their different backgrounds, the two boys find common ground and develop an amicable bond, and Buck's death deeply affects Huck. Buck is described as a friendly and welcoming character. When Huck first meets Buck, he is immediately taken in by his warmth and friendliness. But their relationship is short-lived, as Buck is soon shot and killed in a skirmish with the Shepherdsons. Huck is witness to this horrific event, and is deeply traumatized by the experience to the point of post-traumatic stress:

> "All of a sudden, bang! bang! bang! goes three or four guns—the men had slipped around through the woods and come in from behind without their horses! The boys jumped for the river—both of them hurt—and as they swum down the current the men run along the bank shooting at them and singing out, 'Kill them, kill them!' It made me so sick I most fell out of the tree. I ain't a-going to tell all that happened—it would make me sick again if I was to do that. I wished I hadn't ever come ashore that night to see such things. I ain't ever going to get shut of them—lots of times I dream about them."[28]

The feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons serves as a stark illustration of the lengths to which these families will go to uphold the *sensus communis*, the shared understanding of propriety and honor, at all costs. As aristocrats, their status and wealth are intrinsically tied to the preservation of these societal norms and power structures. The concept of "sacred honor" becomes a tool to justify their actions and maintain their position of power. However, this pursuit of honor and status, as embodied in the feud, reveals a tragic irony. The very structures and norms they strive to uphold lead to their own constant self-obliteration at each other's hands—a conceit that Twain easily could have made into a joke if he had decided to kill off the adults who perpetuated the violence. But that Twain chooses to have the feud result in the deaths of their children reveals the truth: there is

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[26] *HF* 137-138.
[27] *HF* 141.
[28] *HF* 153.

nothing funny in an endless cycle of killing. Instead, their wealth, power, and status are only temporarily preserved at the cost of their children's lives—the very progeny that would have extended the bloodlines they hold so very dear.

The novel's most horrifying episode of *sensus communis* asserting its dominance is in the brief, nihilistic vignette that portrays the grim resolution to an Arkansaw class skirmish. Boggs, a town drunk, is shot and killed in broad daylight by Colonel Sherburn, who then calmly returns to his home. The town's residents, incensed that someone would shoot one of their local own and walk away, trail him back to his residence with the intention of lynching him, only to find themselves, a mob of several dozen, utterly intimidated in the middle of the day by a single ill-tempered patrician sneering from his balcony:

> "The idea of you lynching anybody! It's amusing. The idea of you thinking you had pluck enough to lynch a man! Because you're brave enough to tar and feather poor friendless cast-out women that come along here, did that make you think you had grit enough to lay your hands on a man? Why, a man's safe in the hands of ten thousand of your kind—as long as it's daytime and you're not behind him."[29]

Sherburn's venomous invective, spewed from the comfort of his balcony, would have served as a chilling reality check to Twain's readers. The isolated incident, which has virtually no narrative impact on the rest of the novel, nevertheless communicates the underlying understanding—the *sensus communis*—that would have been shared by anyone who ever lived in the American South, before or after the war: you cannot take a meaningful stand against the powers that be in this world without being done away with:

> "Do I know you? I know you clear through. I was born and raised in the South, and I've lived in the North; so I know the average all around. The average man's a coward. In the North he lets anybody walk over him that wants to, and goes home and prays for a humble spirit to bear it. In the South one man all by himself, has stopped a stage full of men in the daytime, and robbed the lot. Your newspapers call you a brave people so much that you think you *are* braver than any other people—whereas you're just *as* brave, and no braver. Why don't your juries hang murderers? Because they're afraid the man's friends will shoot them in the back, in the dark—and it's just what they *would* do.
>
> "So they always acquit; and then a *man* goes in the night, with a hundred masked cowards at his back and lynches the rascal. Your mistake is, that you didn't bring a man with you; that's one mistake, and the other is that you didn't come in the dark and fetch your masks. You brought *part* of a man—Buck

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[29] *HF* 190.

> Harkness, there—and if you hadn't had him to start you, you'd a taken it out in blowing.
>
> "You didn't want to come. The average man don't like trouble and danger. *You* don't like trouble and danger. But if only *half* a man—like Buck Harkness, there—shouts 'Lynch him! lynch him!' you're afraid to back down—afraid you'll be found out to be what you are—*cowards*—and so you raise a yell, and hang yourselves on to that half-a-man's coat-tail, and come raging up here, swearing what big things you're going to do. The pitifulest thing out is a mob; that's what an army is—a mob; they don't fight with courage that's born in them, but with courage that's borrowed from their mass, and from their officers. But a mob without any *man* at the head of it is *beneath* pitifulness. Now the thing for *you* to do is to droop your tails and go home and crawl in a hole. If any real lynching's going to be done it will be done in the dark, Southern fashion; and when they come they'll bring their masks, and fetch a *man* along. Now *leave*—and take your half-a-man with you."[30]

In this brief episode, which is profoundly non-cathartic, vast swaths of angry, violent discontents are easily cowed back into their place by a wealthy untouchable who has already demonstrated his willingness to shoot anyone among them in broad daylight. He knows—correctly—that he will get away with it. He reminds the mob that holding people accountable means risking the ire of their friends, among whom there are almost certainly one or two willing to commit violence. He ominously demonstrates his belief that the 'right' way to kill someone important—if there could be such a thing—is to do it surreptitiously, 'in the dark,' with deniability intact. Sherburn's repeated excoriation of the mob's failure to 'bring a man' along, while fraught with the baggage of 19th-century chauvinism (which has been critiqued at length elsewhere), points to a more structural critique of democratic movements and structures. Sherburn, whose military honorific invokes rank and status, behaves from the moment he appears to the last word he utters exactly like a person who considers himself untouchable by those around him—because he is.

Sherburn's repeated criticism of the mob's failure to "bring a man" along, while fraught with all the baggage of 19th century chauvinism that has been critiqued at length elsewhere, points to a more structural critique of democratic movements and structures. By "bring a man," Sherburn is invoking a person (in the 19th century South, basically always a biological man) who is of such a position that he can direct the mob, make it effective. To Sherburn, a "man" means an operator, a person of means and influence. His monologue is a chilling reminder of the power dynamics at play in the society of the time. He stands on his balcony, looking down at the mob, and delivers a scathing critique of their lack of courage and their dependence on the safety of numbers. He mocks their pretense of bravery, their reliance on the anonymity of the mob, reminding them if any single one of them needed to draw together all their social power to protect themselves or advance their interests, they could not do it.

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[30] *HF* 190-191.

Sherburn's speech is a sobering return to reality for a novel that often veers into the realm of the absurd. It demonstrates to the reader what Huck already knows—sometimes the most commonsensical thing to do is let an absurdity pass in silence. The crowd disperses, utterly defeated, and Huck, for his part, keeps his mouth shut and stays out of things as much as he can. That said, he is certainly bewildered by his world. And if society rejects him as a "low-down and ornery" sort, Huck rejects it right back—first on the grounds of its absurdities and later on the grounds of its cruelties and lack of pity. Huck's moral distastes, in fact, align precisely with the very things that St. Petersburg's polite society holds in the highest esteem: religion, education, and, above all, money. These all seem so far removed from our humanness, our connection to nature, which is very important to Huck, who essentially lives off the land. They are all so artificial, dangerous, cruel, and ultimately pointless. The *sensus communis*, the shared understanding of society, is revealed to be a hollow facade—a dangerous game of pretense and power that leaves no room for genuine human connection or empathy. In fact, these values are often in direct opposition to them.

Dealing with Pap

One of Huck's most important judgments in all the novel is the realization that his father, whom Twain only refers to as "pap," is the greatest threat in his life, further discerning that despite their familial connection, pap is irredeemable and must be excised from his life completely. This is an absolute rejection of one's patriarchal blood lineage, but one that is necessary for Huck to move forward in his life. From the outset, pap is portrayed as an existential threat to Huck, his history of violence and unpredictable nature serving as relentless sources of tension and fear. Though we learn in the novel's opening pages that pap has not been seen around town for some time, Huck is on high alert for his return all the same, constantly vigilant to spot signs of pap's presence. His paranoia, of course, is well-founded, for pap does indeed come looking for Huck's newfound fortune.

Pap's presence—both when physically present and when hovering unseen in the background—is as inescapable as the fact that Huck owes half his genetic makeup to this hateful, violent imbecile. Pap embodies the archetype of the angry, illiterate, "dirty" South, characterized almost entirely by his irascibility, bigotry, sense of victimhood, and propensity to violence. As a representative of the disenfranchised white working class, he relies on institutionalized racism—first slavery, and later Jim Crow—to maintain some semblance of superiority. In pap, we see the manifestation of internalized victimization. His world is one of unrelenting hatred and blame directed outward at society, with the government, affluent individuals, and the Black population serving as his primary targets. His language, particularly his use of racial slurs, is loaded with palpable hatred, and his venomous invective against a Black professor encapsulates the resentment felt by the socially and economically disadvantaged white population.

> "Oh, yes, this is a wonderful govment, wonderful. Why, looky here. There was a free n—r there from Ohio—a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat; and there ain't a man in that town that's got as fine clothes as what he had; and he had a gold watch and chain, and a silver-headed cane—the awfulest old gray-

> headed nabob in the State. And what do you think? They said he was a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain't the wust. They said he could vote when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was 'lection day, and I was just about to go and vote myself if I warn't too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a State in this country where they'd let that n—r vote, I drawed out. I says I'll never vote agin. Them's the very words I said; they all heard me; and the country may rot for all me—I'll never vote agin as long as I live. And to see the cool way of that n—r—why, he wouldn't a give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out o' the way. I says to the people, why ain't this n—r put up at auction and sold?—that's what I want to know. And what do you reckon they said? Why, they said he couldn't be sold till he'd been in the State six months, and he hadn't been there that long yet. There, now—that's a specimen. They call that a govment that can't sell a free n—r till he's been in the State six months. Here's a govment that calls itself a govment, and lets on to be a govment, and thinks it is a govment, and yet's got to set stock-still for six whole months before it can take a hold of a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free n—r, and—"
>
> Pap was agoing on so he never noticed where his old limber legs was taking him to, so he went head over heels over the tub of salt pork and barked both shins, and the rest of his speech was all the hottest kind of language—mostly hove at the n—r and the govment, though he give the tub some, too…[31]

The only thing that pap fails to blame for his miserable lot in life is, ironically, the one thing he has some degree of agency over—his alcoholism. The new judge in town, who will decide the fate of Huck's fortune and whose favor Pap tries to court, identifies him as a wayward sinner whose addiction, through the lens of his Christian worldview, is the manifestation of having fallen under the spell of one of Satan's many temptations. Pap likewise identifies the judge as a garden-variety Southern Christian and preys upon his eagerness to see himself as a generous, forgiving soul after the heart of the Lord. Pap's tearful confession elicits the pity of the judge and his wife, and soon they all sob together as pap pledges to be "a man that's started a new life." [32] But of course, as soon as pap is tucked into his stately guestroom for the night, he develops a thirst and slips out the window and into town, where he trades his new clothes—the symbol of the judge's beneficence reduced to a barter item in Pap's hands—for a jug of whiskey before returning to have a "good old time" on the judge's premises. After finding the drunkard the next day, having destroyed the guestroom, rolled off the roof, and broken his arm in two places, the judge concludes that "a body could reform the old man with a shotgun, maybe, but he didn't know no other way."[33]

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[31] *HF* 34.
[32] *HF* 26.
[33] *HF* 28.

Huck himself never makes any mention of attempting to "reform the old man" and does not belie any indication that he believes it could be done; his lack of comment on the matter, besides, does not indicate that he even has any desire to. Huck is ultimately faced with the judgment (in this case, a decision)[34] of what to do when he makes the grim realization that without a dramatic change in circumstances, Pap's deteriorating alcoholism will lead to continued violence against the boy, even up to the point of killing him. Pap's addiction reaches that very inflection point in Chapter 6, when, still holding Huck hostage in his remote woodland cabin, Pap reaches a state of alcoholic hallucinosis, an extremely dangerous condition similar delirium tremens but brought on much more suddenly by cessation of heavy drinking.[35] Alcoholic hallucinosis is primarily characterized by intense auditory hallucinations that have been found to resemble the symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia; in pap's case, he comes to believe that Huck is "the Angel of Death," having come to take him. Taking a knife, he tries to kill Huck, but Huck manages to evade his attacks until Pap passes out.

From this point forward Huck makes the decision to abandon his father and, by extension, his lineage. Unlike the Grangerfords, a genteel Southern family who pride themselves on their ancestry, Huck has no attachment to his past or family heritage. His only known relatives are his abusive father and his late mother, rendering his lineage far from prestigious. In sharp contrast to societal expectations of a peer like Tom Sawyer, Huck adopts a pragmatic approach, prioritizing his safety and well-being over familial obligations. Thus, Huck abandons his father forever, giving no indication of remorse or regret. To well-bred Southern gentility like the Grangerfords, abandoning one's lineage would be unthinkable. But Huck, a mongrel of the South who likely does not know much of his family history at all, probably reckons he is better off not getting too hung up on it.

"Making Allowances"

The novel takes a pivotal turn at the beginning of Chapter 19, when Twain introduces a pair of dastardly ne'er-do-wells who will soon emerge as the closest thing to traditional, embodied antagonists as the novel has. As Huck and Jim are slipping back onto the raft in the aftermath of the Shepardson-Grangerford massacre, Huck spies "a couple of men tearing up the path as tight as they could foot it."[36] Huck, who immediately assumes the worst of intentions, tries to set off in the raft before the two can get near; but his inclination toward compassion over hard-heartedness gets the better of him as they "sung out and begged [Huck] to save their lives—said they hadn't been doing nothing, and was being chased for it—said there was men and dogs a-coming."[37] This unceremonious entrance does not befit the titles (and the tragic backstories) that these two soon bestow upon themselves—the "rightful Duke of Bridgewater… forlorn, torn from [his] high estate, despised by the cold world, ragged, worn, heart-

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[34] Note the distinction between judgment as object-concept or scenario judgment (i.e. "this is *x*," or "*x* is happening here") vs. judgment as decision (i.e. "I judge that the right thing to do is *x*").

[35] P.S. Bhat et al., "Alcoholic Hallucinosis," *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 21, no. 2 (July 2012): 155-57, doi:10.4103/0972-6748.119646.

[36] *HF* 158.

[37] *HF* 159.

broken, and degraded to the companionship of felons on a raft,"[38] and "the pore disappeared Dauphin, Looy the Seventeen, son of Looy the Sixteen and Marry Antonette… in blue jeans and misery, the wanderin', exiled, trampled-on, and sufferin' rightful King of France."[39] All parties feign astonishment at these dramatic revelations, but Huck quickly realizes that these two are not who they claim to be, but he decides just as quickly to play along anyway:

> It didn't take me long to make up my mind that these liars warn't no kings nor dukes at all, but just low-down humbugs and frauds. But I never said nothing, never let on; kept it to myself; it's the best way; then you don't have no quarrels, and don't get into no trouble. If they wanted us to call them kings and dukes, I hadn't no objections, 'long as it would keep peace in the family; and it warn't no use to tell Jim, so I didn't tell him. If I never learnt nothing else out of pap, I learnt that the best way to get along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way.[40]

Thus, Huck and Jim go through the motions of making "allowances" for the king and the duke, a process which largely involves serving their meals, making their stay on the raft comfortable, and acting as accomplices to their illicit schemes. Huck and Jim placate the scoundrels to avoid conflict, recognizing their selfish and dangerous nature. Their difference is merely an act of self-preservation against violent, unscrupulous men. In private discussion, however, and Jim unpack the two swindlers and their motivations when discussing how best to make sense of them:

> "Don't it s'prise you de way dem kings carries on, Huck?"
>
> "No," I says, "it don't."
>
> "Why don't it, Huck?"
>
> "Well, it don't, because it's in the breed. I reckon they're all alike."
>
> "But, Huck, dese kings o' ourn is reglar rapscallions; dat's jist what dey is; dey's reglar rapscallions."
>
> "Well, that's what I'm a-saying; all kings is mostly rapscallions, as fur as I can make out."
>
> "Is dat so?"
>
> "You read about them once—you'll see… All I say is, kings is kings, and you got to make allowances. Take them all around, they're a mighty ornery lot. It's the way they're raised."[41]

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[38] *HF* 162.
[39] *HF* 163.
[40] *HF* 165.
[41] *HF* 199.

As he goes on to unpack various examples of this "mighty ornery lot," as he calls them, Huck explains that what these two "deposed aristocrats" on the Mississippi and the mightiest kings in European history have in common is their proclivity to simply claim authority that does not necessarily belong to them by rights in the first place. Their sense of entitlement, as well as the violent means to which they are willing to resort in order to enforce it, recalls Paine's jab at William the Conqueror and, by extension, the whole English monarchy, in *Common Sense:* "A French bastard landing with an armed banditti, and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original.—It certainly hath no divinity in it."[42]

Huck and Jim placate the two not out of respect, but as an act of simple self-preservation, each aware that they could easily be met with violence for resisting or, in Jim's case, returned to captivity. Of course, Twain demonstrates the ultimate irony involved in making the decisions to "make allowances" for self-proclaimed kings when, despite their best efforts to appease them, the king and duke turn Jim in for the reward money anyway, the modest sum of "forty dirty dollars."[43] In this sly commentary, which Twain could easily have imagined applying to an underclass of complicit, poor white southerners who idolized their aristocratic overlords' romanticized way of life, Twain demonstrates the ultimate danger of this style of self-preservation—that tyrants treat their subjects as a means to their own ends. This, Twain suggests is the grim reality that southerners needed to understand of their societal betters—that to "make allowances" for a tyrant is to expose oneself to almost certain betrayal. What seems at first to be a practical decision geared toward survival demonstrates itself to be a grave error in judgment as Huck and Jim fail to rid themselves of the two in time to avoid the ill consequences of their acquaintance.

Trusting Tom Sawyer

Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer come from vastly different social backgrounds. Tom, a member of a respectable middle-class family, enjoys a level of social security and privilege that Huck, the son of the town drunkard, can only dream of. This disparity in their social statuses creates an underlying tension in their relationship, as Huck often finds himself deferring to Tom's judgment, not necessarily because he agrees with him, but because he recognizes the social capital that Tom possesses. They find a common purpose, however, in their willingness, even need, to oppose the *sensus communis:* Huck, being an outsider, was not brought up within the trappings of Southern gentility and finds much of it opposed to his needs and wants, and Tom seeks to indulge in his need to rebel and explore the boundaries of what he can get aways with. Thus, it was inevitable that they would become fast friends: "Tom was like the rest of the respectable boys, in that he envied Huckleberry his gaudy outcast condition, and was under strict orders not to play with him. So he played with him every time he got a chance."[44]

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[42] *CS* 14.
[43] *HF* 268.
[44] Twain, *Tom Sawyer,* 40.

Unpacking Huck's friendship with Tom requires simultaneously holding two competing interpretations of its dynamics in one's mind. On the one hand—and in the more immediate sense—Twain paints[45] Tom and Huck's friendship as a genuine one that is rooted in shared interests and experiences. On the cusp of adolescence, Huck and Tom are only just arriving at a point in life in which the petty concerns of adulthood are theirs to worry about; at this age, they are more concerned with adventure and rebelliousness than money, property, and other units of status.

Tom, a member of a respectable middle-class family, is drawn to Huck's company, in part, due to his own rebellious nature. However, this rebellion is inextricably linked to his social position in relation to Huck. In a sense Tom is slumming when hangs around with Huck; he is willing to engage in distasteful behavior by Aunt Sally' standards, but as a child in a well-to-do family, Tom always a reliable social support net to fall back on. Tom's rebellious acts are a form of exploration, a testing of boundaries that his privileged status allows him to undertake without serious consequences. For Huck, though, an outsider and the son of the town drunkard, these acts of rebellion are not just games or adventures but a necessary means of survival. As Huck's connection to society, Tom has social capital that Huck never could never have imagined as a backwoods nobody, "low-down and ornery" as he is. He may have gained a foothold for his own good standing in the community, but ultimately it is Tom and Tom's family vouching for his character that gives Huck refuge within the community of St. Petersburg.

However, we know from early in the novel that Huck does not take Tom Sawyer seriously as an individual, having sized him up as a liar and a bit of a con man, one perhaps too caught up in his own elaborate artifices. While Tom is a fairly constant companion, there are moments when Huck begins to grow weary of Tom's fanciful tales and elaborate games, which he sees as pointless and unproductive. Huck resigns from their game of "robbers" because they never actually rob anyone or do anything of substance. He finds no value in their pretend adventures, stating, "But I couldn't see no profit in it." This point is reinforced when Tom concocts a game about a treasure-laden caravan of Arabs, Spaniards, and elephants: Huck is skeptical but decides to tag along anyway, giving Tom Sawyer the benefit of the doubt yet again, though he knows to expect no different. When it turns out to be nothing more than a Sunday-school picnic, Huck's skepticism is confirmed, seeing that "it warn't anything but a Sunday-school picnic, and only a primer-class at that." When Huck confronts Tom about the disappointing find, saying, "I didn't see no di'monds," Tom Sawyer resorts to one of the con man's favorite tactics—he gaslights.

> He said there was loads of them there, anyway; and he said there was A-rabs there, too, and elephants and things. I said, why couldn't we see them, then? He said if I warn't so ignorant, but had read a book called Don Quixote, I would know without asking. He said it was all done by enchantment. He said there was hundreds of soldiers there, and elephants and treasure, and so on, but we had enemies which he called magicians; and they had turned the

[45] Or "whitewashes," if the reader will pardon the pun.

> whole thing into an infant Sunday-school, just out of spite. I said, all right; then the thing for us to do was to go for the magicians. Tom Sawyer said I was a numskull.[46]

By the end of the novel, however, after Huck and Jim have arrived at the Phelps' family farm—as a guest and a prisoner, respectively—Huck's acquaintance with Tom Sawyer literally saves them, as the Phelpses turn out to be Tom's not-so-distant kin in a twist that is notably far-fetched, even for Twain. The Phelpses, who are Tom's distant relatives, unknowingly provide a gateway for Huck and Jim back into society. The irony is not lost on Huck, who has spent most of the novel rejecting societal norms and expectations. However, he recognizes that Tom's social standing and influence could in this case be their saving grace.

Twain's portrayal of Jim's reaction to Tom's escape plan is particularly noteworthy. While he depicts Jim as being genuinely impressed by Tom's elaborate scheme, it's crucial to consider that Jim also understands that being in Tom's good graces increases his chances of survival. As such, Jim knows better than to openly express any disdain or skepticism he might feel towards a white person's position, even if he is just a boy. What might initially be interpreted as a descent into minstrelsy and submissive capitulation is not merely the deployment of a racist trope. Instead, Twain is illustrating a survival mechanism, a strategy employed by Jim to navigate the treacherous waters of the antebellum South. Jim's apparent admiration for Tom's plan, then, can be seen as a calculated move, a performance designed to placate those in power as long as is necessary to increase his chances of survival and, eventually, freedom.

The climax of their grand escape plan unfolds as a grand farce. When the trio finally puts their plan into action, it immediately descends into chaos. Tom ends up shot in the leg, and Jim is recaptured, ironically because of his decision to turn back and help the wounded Tom. This incident provides a stark illustration of Jim's inherent worth and humanity, which is ironically acknowledged by the doctor who tends to Tom's wounds, saying "a n—r like that is worth a thousand dollars—and kind treatment, too."[47] This statement, while seemingly a compliment, underscores the dehumanizing reality of Jim's existence as a slave, where his worth is quantified in monetary terms, and his deservingness of kindness is seen as exceptional rather than a basic human right.

Twain, however, spares us the heart-wrenching spectacle of Jim's tragic re-enslavement or sale down the river. Instead, he delivers a surprising revelation: Jim had been a free man for months, ever since Miss Watson's death. This twist in the tale is as shocking as it is infuriating. Tom, it turns out, had been aware of Jim's freedom all along. Yet, he chose to keep this crucial piece of information to himself, orchestrating an elaborate and dangerous escape plan for his own amusement. To Tom, the entire ordeal was nothing more than a game, a grand adventure to be enjoyed, savored, and recollected later. This revelation underscores the stark contrast between Tom's privileged position and Jim's precarious existence. For Tom, the stakes were never real; he was merely playing a role in his own romanticized narrative. For Jim, however, the stakes were his life and freedom. The disparity between

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[46] *HF* 15-16.
[47] *HF* 353.

their experiences serves as a chilling reminder of the power dynamics at play, and the cruel indifference of those who, like Tom, can afford to treat life-altering circumstances as mere child's play.

Huck's decision to go along with Tom's plan, despite its absurdity, is not born out of trust in Tom's *judgment* but rather out of a recognition of the power dynamics at play. Huck understands that Tom, with his social standing and charm, can likely get away with just about anything. More importantly, Huck further bets that Tom's word will protect him, so he understands that it is in his better interest not to alienate him. Jim, too, understands this dynamic and chooses to endure further indignity for the chance at freedom. Huck, too, makes a similar concession. He sets aside his common sense, his instinct for practical and straightforward solutions, in favor of the *sensus communis*. This is not a rejection of his own judgment but another strategic decision to ingratiate himself with Tom Sawyer and ensure that he will vouch for them if necessary.

Saving Jim

> *"Your damnation don't slumber; it will come swiftly and, in all probability, very suddenly upon many of you. You have reason to wonder that you are not already in hell."*
>
> —EDWARDS[48]

The most substantial and pivotal judgment Huck makes is his decision to commit himself to aiding in Jim's escape. Being the ethical crux of the novel, this decision forces Huck to confront, head-on, what it means for a white person to act as a moral agent in the 1850s American South. Being of the status that he is—not to mention a child—Huck's ability to influence the workings of society is virtually nil; he has some money at his disposal, but he is not wealthy by any meaningful standard.[49] Still, there are several points at which Huck's decisions directly affect Jim's wellbeing, with none being more important than his decision to risk eternal damnation to advance Jim's escape.

In Chapter 31, Huck makes the decision, once and for all and after agonizing reflection, that he would rather go to hell than turn Jim in. Though he has furthered Jim's running away consistently up to this point, and at times has fretted over the morality of it, he has been able to brush aside the ultimate moral question until this point in the novel. Until now, assisting Jim has largely coincided with furthering Huck's own journey; here, however, he has arrived at a decision which, if he *does* decide to act in Jim's favor, he is almost certainly acting against his own well-being. Assessing Huck's decisions regarding Jim's well-being is brought into sharp focus at this point in the novel because Twain finally forces Huck to consider the fullness of the stakes of his decision.

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[48] Jonathan Edwards, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God: A Sermon Preached at Enfield, July 8th, 1741. Selected Sermons of Jonathan Edwards, edited by Harry Norman Gardiner, Macmillan, 1904, 95.

[49] Having access to $6,000 cash in 1850 would yield roughly the equivalent of $241,000 in purchasing power in 2024—enough to buy a home in the country and get started on some sensible investments, but far from world-moving money. See "$6,000 in 1850 → 2024 | Inflation Calculator." Official Inflation Data, Alioth Finance, August 10, 2024. https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1850?amount=6000.

Understanding the fact that this is a moral quandary at all for Huck is central to understanding the novel and the culture it so insistently excoriates. From a present-day perspective—one that, despite still being mired in racial injustice, considers chattel slavery unequivocally abhorrent—no moral judgment could seem more natural than to believe that helping a man to freedom is good and right. But nothing could be further from the 19th-century white Southern perspective through which Huck is working. As we have been reminded several times to this point, aiding the escape of a runaway slave is defined as theft in Huck's culture. Though still a child, Huck's world has shown itself time and again to be a pitiless and unforgiving one—whoever the arbiter may be, someone will see to it that Huck is punished for his crimes (his harrowing recollections of what had become of Buck Grangerford for the sin of having the wrong name may well trouble him as well). And soon, Huck considers not just the earthly implications of what he's done, but the eternal ones as well.

> And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's n—r that hadn't ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there's One that's always on the lookout, and ain't a-going to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn't so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, 'there was the Sunday-school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you there that people that acts as I'd been acting about that n—r goes to everlasting fire.'[50]

Southern Protestantism, the foundational *sensus communis* throughout the South in Huck's time and our own, is deeply concerned with both the immortality of the soul and the conditions under which it will spend eternity. The God of the American South is the wrathful God of Edwards' *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, who is quick to anger and generous in His dispensation of punishment. Southern preachers borrowed liberally from Edwards' theology (minus his abolitionism), especially Baptists and Presbyterians. Among the many marks he left on Southern Protestantism is its preoccupation with hell, and how easy it can be to end up there.

Hell, it must be remembered, was not (and still is not) an abstract, metaphorical concept in the minds of most white southern Christians in the mid-19th century. These people believe that hell is very real—it is not a lamentable, metaphysical separation from God; it is a tangible, physical place where sinners go to suffer infinitely at the hands of demons. Consisting mostly of Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians (plus some Lutherans and Episcopalians), most Southern Protestants traced their conceptions of hell to the old Puritans and their sermons on the subject. "The misery of the wicked in

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[50] *HF* 269.

hell will be absolutely eternal" Edwards wrote in 1739: "That eternal death, or punishment, which God threatens to the wicked, is not annihilation, but an abiding sensible punishment or misery."[51]

For the faithful in Huck's community, hell is not merely a spiritual or metaphysical state of existence, but a realm of physical torment. Edwards, in his writings, offers a vivid, albeit nonspecific, portrayal of the experience of hell. His words conjure an image of a place of ceaseless suffering, a place as real and tangible as the physical world we inhabit. Edwards writes, in terms that are nonspecific yet nonetheless palpable, about the experience of hell:

> It is the wrath of the infinite God. If it were only the wrath of man, though it were of the most potent prince, it would be comparatively little to be regarded. The wrath of kings is very much dreaded, especially of absolute monarchs, that have the possessions and lives of their subjects wholly in their power, to be disposed of at their mere will… The subject that very much enrages an arbitrary prince is liable to suffer the most extreme torments that human art can invent, or human power can inflict. But the greatest earthly potentates, in their greatest majesty and strength, and when clothed in their greatest terrors, are but feeble, despicable worms of the dust, in comparison of the great and almighty Creator and King of heaven and earth…[52]

In other words, conceiving of hell for a white fundamentalist Christian is to consider the worst kinds of physical torture imaginable. It would involve imagining being *conscious* of the pain from this torture, as the body will never succumb to numbness or lose consciousness from the pain. It can only be conceived as pain that is beyond endurance but must be endured nonetheless. Forever.

> It is everlasting wrath. It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity there will be no end to this exquisite, horrible misery. When you look forward, shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all; you will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty, merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite. Oh, who can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it give

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[51] See Edwards, *The Eternity of Hell's Torments [A Sermon on Matt. Xxv. 46.]*, edited by Charles Edward De Coetlogon, 1788, p. 9.

[52] Edwards, *Sinners*, 89.

> but a very feeble, faint representation of it; it is inexpressible and inconceivable: for 'who knows the power of God's anger? How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in danger of this great wrath and infinite misery![53]

That is what white Christian Southerners believe hell is. To Christian Southerners of Huck's time, hell was not an abstraction or metaphor. It was a vivid, tangible reality, a place of ceaseless physical torment. This belief plays a critical role in shaping their moral and ethical decision-making in Huck's community—namely, that challenging the *sensus communis* in virtually any way might be considered an act of such onerous transgression that it offends God to the point of exercising His ultimate punitive authority. Every week, congregations were sternly reminded from the pulpits of the presumed consequences of challenging the established order, which their pastors claimed was "ordained by God." In practice, what Southern aristocrats sought to uphold was not the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus, but rather a power structure that ensured their continued prosperity and dominance. They papered over this grotesque reality with a theology that not only justified their actions but also placed them at the top of a hierarchy that directed its lowest members to treat their oppressors "with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ" (Ephesians 6:5). The God they worshiped not only condoned but actively encouraged their dominion over the earth, capital, labor, animals, natural resources, and everything else they could bring under their dominion. Like all strongmen, they maintained their exploitative order through the constant threat—and frequent demonstration—of violence. They extorted the people around them by forceful means, using their theology as a tool to legitimize their actions and maintain their grip on power.

Undoubtedly many of these grim ruminations would have cascaded through Huck's mind in a flash. "It made me shiver," Huck writes, reflecting on the possibility of such a fate, before engaging in the only activity he would have been consciously aware of as a tool for wrestling through such problems: he prays. Recall that Huck is thoroughly grounded in the idea that it is categorically sinful to advance a runaway slave's escape. Doing so is immediately intuitable as theft in Huck's *sensus communis*, and theft is unambiguously forbidden by God.[54] Huck prays for deliverance from his "sinful" temptations—which is to say, the "temptation" to assist Jim—as the widow has instructed him, but runs into unavoidable trouble by recognizing that he simply *cannot do that*:

> I about made up my mind to pray, and see if I couldn't try to quit being the kind of a boy I was and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come. Why wouldn't they? It warn't no use to try and hide it from Him. Nor from *me*, neither. I knowed very well why they wouldn't come. It was because my heart warn't right; it was because I warn't square; it was because I was playing double. I was letting *on* to give up sin, but away inside of me I was

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[53] Ibid, 93-94.
[54] Exodus 20:15.

> holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth *say* I would do the right thing and the clean thing, and go and write to that n—r's owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie, and He knowed it. You can't pray a lie—I found that out.[55]

Now Huck finds himself in a remarkable predicament concerning his moral decision-making process. Convinced as he is that the act of aiding a runaway is inherently wrong, he likewise is convinced that his *actual* moral feeling—i.e., that it is *wrong* that Jim should suffer by going back into slavery—is itself morally abhorrent, according to the standards of his community. Huck's previous internalization of his own "orneriness," exacerbated by his outcast state and wretched family history, paves the way for him to see himself as the inherent sinner that he has been taught he is. Doing the "right thing," as his community standards would have it, would mean turning Jim in, despite the knowledge that Miss Watson might be so enraged by Jim's "ungratefulness" as to sell him down the river. But his "gut" feeling (which is to say, his *aesthetic* consideration) is that it would not be good or right to do this because it would cause suffering to Jim, and Huck is the only person in the novel to recognize that Jim's aesthetic experiences—his *feelings*—are important.

Huck gives up on his prayer, but not on thinking through what to do next. He writes out the confessional note intended for Miss Watson, but considers Jim again, this time in the context of their time spent together, and not through the lens of the *sensus communis.* Huck say that he:

> …went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him…[56]

If Huck had not taken the time to reflect on this moral judgment, he easily might have dismissed the matter altogether. Anyone in Huck's position would have been taught from childhood that Jim is property first and last, and we see in Huck's wrestling with the subject that he has a lot of trouble thinking around that concept as well, feeling guilt as he does for "stealing a poor old woman's n—r that hadn't ever done [him] no harm."[57] Undoubtedly, any of Huck's white contemporaries would not think twice about turning in a runaway if given the opportunity; not only would it be criminal not to do so, but there would often be a monetary reward offered, as well. Fortunately, since Huck does not place much stock in money (and since he not in want of it), the latter consideration never crosses his

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[55] *HF* 269.

[56] Ibid.

[57] The syntax of this sentence is interesting, containing unclear relationship between the direct object of who exactly "hadn't ever done [him] no harm." Contextually, Huck clearly means Miss Watson, this being the point at which he wrestles with her victim hood. However, Huck's poor grammar creates a slick double-meaning here: syntactically, he is saying it is the "old woman's n—r" who had never wronged him.

mind. Instead, Huck finds himself unable to "harden"[58] himself against Jim, who by this point has openly confessed that he considers Huck to be his only friend in the world:

> "Pooty soon I'll be a-shout'n' for joy, en I'll say, it's all on accounts o' Huck; I's a free man, en I couldn't ever ben free ef it hadn' ben for Huck; Huck done it. Jim won't ever forgit you, Huck; you's de bes' fren' Jim's ever had; en you's de only fren' ole Jim's got now."[59]

Initially, Huck is inclined to believe that the morally correct course of action would be to turn Jim in—not to mention the fact that he is terrified by the prospect of eternal damnation. Motivated by fears associated with violating these societal norms, Huck writes a letter to Miss Watson revealing Jim's location. For a moment, Huck feels a sense of pride, a belief that he has done the "right" thing. But the feeling is brief; having "resolved" his moral quandary, Huck forgets to return to his prayer and instead lets his mind wander, first toward the satisfaction of "thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell" but soon meandering into more important matters:

> And [I] went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around and see that paper.[60]

Here in this moment, as Huck cycles through a series of vivid memories of the man who is in every way his best and most-loved friend, Huck's common sense kicks in just in time. He recognizes this as *the* pivotal moment in his life, a moment that will determine each of their fates—not in any hypothetical afterlife, but in *this* one. Huck takes the letter "a-trembling, because [he]'d got to decide, forever,

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[58] A turn of phrase clearly invoking Huck's protestant upbringing, the notion of a "hardened heart" appears numerous times throughout the Old and New Testaments, often in reference to figures in power refusing to have (which is to say, *feel*) pity for those suffering. See Exodus 4:21, 7:3-4, 14:8; Deuteronomy 2:30; Isaiah 6:10, 42:25; Matthew 3:15 (as well as Acts 28:17 — same verse appears in both books), Romans 2:5; and Revelation 16:9. Twain's ironic invocation of just those passages of scripture that emphasize the sinfulness of refusing to accept as valid the pain of others is among his more subtle indicators of the ever-present moral hypocrisy of the adults in Huck's society, not to mention Twain's own command of scripture.

[59] *HF* 125.

[60] *HF* 270.

betwixt two things, and [he] knowed it." Finally, after a brief but decisive moment, Huck says aloud, "All right, then, I'll *go* to hell," and tears the letter up.

This is the point of no return, the point at which Huck fully commits to rejecting the societal norms of his community by dedicating his actions toward the ultimate end of aiding Jim's escape to freedom. He also understands the supposed consequences for doing so—aiding a runaway slave was not only illegal, it was considered deviant, morally abhorrent behavior in the mid-19th century South. Moreover, the odds of successfully escaping together without injury or death were slim—the novel began just a hair's breadth from the Illinois border (which would have been dotted with slavecatchers),[61] and Twain's central conceit of placing his protagonists on an engineless raft that keeps taking them deeper south makes their prospects for success very unlikely. Huck's willingness to risk such a fate for the sake of Jim, whom he has been taught to view as nothing more than property, rides entirely on the fact that Huck has come to recognize Jim's humanity, understanding that, whether this white southern God approves or not, the only moral option for Huck is to aid in Jim's escape. As such, he commits himself to doing so "and never thought no more about reforming."

The Trouble with Huck Finn

If teaching *Huck Finn* seems difficult, that is because *Huck Finn* is a difficult text. A satire of stunning dexterity, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is so masterfully objectionable that it could find the most vociferous critics in any century, let alone one so rife with pedants as our own. It is a children's book by careful design, but that design is not to soften or excuse the horrors of the antebellum South; it is to introduce children to these horrors in a way that provides a foothold for thinking critically about not only the societal infrastructures that dominate their lives but also about how to navigate them with humanity and conscientiousness.

While it was a success on publication and found its way into virtually every English classroom in the United States by the early to mid-20th century, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has dramatically fallen out of favor in recent decades. While the demographics and political orientations of its detractors have morphed, critics have always most vocally taken issue with its language as a matter of ideological principle. Though its immediate critics thought the novel "vulgar," with its belligerent disregard for grammar and heretical tone toward religion, today's readers view the novel's relentless use of the n-word as its cardinal sin, often to the point of refusing to engage with the text whatsoever, considering the presence of such language enough to render the text irredeemable. In the kind of ironic twist that Twain himself might have conjured up, the reasons for outrage over his *magnum opus* have completely turned themselves upside-down in the century-and-a-half since its publishing. While readers in Twain's own time were aghast at his unapologetically antiracist views, readers in our own are shocked by his racist ones. Today, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is all but absent from English classrooms nationwide.

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[61] See James Tackach, "Why Does Jim Not Escape to Illinois in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.*" *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society,* vol. 97, no. 3, pp 216 – 225.

As a satire of the highest order, *Huck Finn* lampoons every level of Huck's sociocultural order, scrutinizing and ultimately subverting societal attitudes towards religion, wealth, and education. Of all the conventional attitudes, societal norms, and power dynamics that Twain critiques, none are more prominently or relentlessly explored than those surrounding race, which, as a child coming of age, Huck is learning to scrutinize according to his own judgment in real time as he ventures down the Mississippi. Set in the mid-1840s but published in 1885, *Huck Finn* was an obvious excoriation of the entrenched attitudes inherited from the antebellum South, which, by the time the novel was published, had reverted to codifying white supremacy into law despite the War and Reconstruction. By the moral standards of "polite" society, Huck Finn's attitudes and behaviors are unacceptable in both Twain's century and our own, with the issue of race as their inflection point.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is not a novel problematized by race. It is a novel that is *about* race. Nothing makes this point more firmly than in the novel's liberal dispensation of the dreaded n-word, now widely considered the most vulgar and offensive word in American English.[62] It appears 212 times in the novel, with the relatively tame—albeit still cruelly clinical— word "slave" appearing only eleven times by contrast.[63] It has been argued about at length whether or not this was necessary for Twain to do this; he likely thought so, the attention to authentic representation of southern language patterns being among his chief concerns. In the 21st century, Mark Twain—as well as Huck Finn—may be considered unapologetic racists. But by the standards of the 19th century, this is simply not a sufficient characterization of the novel's attitudes toward and treatment of race.

The crux of the matter is that, barring the word "slave," the n-word was the *only* general term to describe a black person in Huck's environment. There is no way around that, and this being a 19th century novel, it cannot reasonably be argued that Twain could not have used another word in its place without the novel reading very strangely. While there is no use tap-dancing around this most difficult of subjects, that has not stopped people from trying. One extreme approach removed the "n" word from the text altogether, replacing it where necessary with the more clinical "slave."[64] While the "slave Jim" edition of *Huck Finn* (and the "robot Jim"[65] edition that parodied it) might have been well-intentioned, it missed the point altogether and replaced the offending noun with an arguably worse one, for whatever the relative demerits of each term have when compared to one another may be, this much is certain: *Jim is not a slave*.

Not at his core, anyway, and not within the text of the novel. He is at times held captive and is always a fugitive, but barring a few expository incidents in the novel's early chapters, the reader hardly sees Jim in the context of his life as an enslaved person. We see him as an impromptu runaway

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[62] I make this claim from the perspective of both a 21st century *sensus communis* as well as a reflective, common-sense judgment. The final judgment in this case is the same from either approach.

[63] David Sloane, "The N-Word in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Reconsidered." *The Mark Twain Annual*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014, 71.

[64] See Alan Gribben, ed., *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: The NewSouth Edition*, NewSouth Books, 2011. The issues here are difficult since neither the customary language nor the law allowed for a black person to be a legal person, and that still applies with the substitution 'slave.' Slaves were *property,* not 'persons.'

[65] After the "Slave Jim" edition was released, a parody edit was released that replaced the n-word with the word "robot" to highlight the unworkability of the exercise in the first place. See Etta Devine and Gabriel Diani, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Robotic Edition*, Diani and Devine Press, 2011.

companion, as a compassionate elder figure, as a loving and remorseful father, and even as a man reduced to humiliation by minstrelsy. But we do not see a slave. We may see a man enslaved by a vicious system of capital, and even if Jim understands where he stands in that system, he does not capitulate his agency. "Yes; en I's rich now, come to look at it," Jim says to Huck. "I owns mysef, en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars."[66]

What can be said is this: if readers find themselves uncomfortable with the language and themes within the book's pages, it is because that is precisely Twain's intent. As a satire exploring society's normalized cruelties, *Huckleberry Finn* deliberately provokes moral outrage, disbelief, and visceral reactions in its own readers. Ideological approaches that primarily judge the text against a set of moral standards associated with contemporary literary criticism fundamentally misinterpret the literary strategy at play. Twain's project is to ruthlessly scrutinize a complex nexus of social conventions, attitudes, institutions, and power dynamics that shaped the human experience in the South, black and white. His master stroke—as well as his gravest transgression, as it were—consists in confronting us with the everyday inhumanities that otherwise passed without notice.

Therefore, while it can be admitted that Huck's attitudes are racist by conditioning, engaging as he does in more than a few commonplace racist tropes within the novel's pages, it cannot be overlooked that the racist worldview in the South was the default one. Any antiracism in this environment would not only be of foreign sociocultural influence, but it would put one in direct confrontation with the *sensus communis* in ways that could land one in real trouble, if not physical danger. Huck plainly does, however, come to recognize the injustices embedded in his society and consciously places himself in danger, risking damnation itself, to advance the ultimate cause of Jim's freedom, but we cannot make the mistake of thinking that the received racial attitudes of a boy in Huck's position is something that can be sloughed off like an old coat.

The novel has also been condemned for its rather extraordinary ending, which has drawn the ire of critics everywhere and earned the scorn of even some of the novel's greatest defenders. With Tom Sawyer's miraculous reappearance, the revelation of Jim's freedom, and the cockamamie nature of Tom's "escape" plan to free Jim, *Huckleberry Finn* takes something of a turn into outlandish farce in the last few chapters, an opinion that is echoed throughout the body of literature on the novel. Twain has been accused of appending a haphazard deus ex machina to the conclusion of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The improbable reunion of Huck and Tom Sawyer, facilitated by a chance encounter at Tom's extended family's farm, has been a point of contention for many critics. Esteemed voices like Ernest Hemingway and Leo Marx have expressed their disdain for the novel's ending. Hemingway was so annoyed by the ending that he advised readers to stop at the point where Jim is kidnapped and turned in by the king and the duke, declaring, "That is the real end. The rest is just cheating."[67]

The novel's "happy" ending revolves around two broad conceits and both are beyond implausible. The first, of course, is the astronomical coincidence that, after drifting "all the way down the river, eleven hundred mile,"[68] Jim and Huck end up on a farmstead owned by Tom Sawyer's distant family,

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[66] In Twain's typically wry style, Jim immediately proceeds to consider the practical, if ironic, implications of his view: "'I wisht I had de money, I wouldn' want no mo'." (*HF* 57).

[67] Ernest Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 23.

[68] *HF* 358.

which allows Tom himself to make an appearance in the novel's final chapters. The other is Miss Watson's sudden, seemingly inexplicable decision to free Jim in her will. Throughout the novel, Jim's monetary "value" fluctuates between $800 and $1,000[69]—not an insignificant sum in the context of the era. The notion that a wealthy individual like Miss Watson would suddenly feel more deeply for Jim's humanity than for the state of her holdings is utterly implausible without Miss Watson having undergone some variety of profound moral episode.

According to Tom Sawyer's account, however, this is exactly what happened. His account is brief but pivotal: "Old Miss Watson died two months ago, and she was ashamed she ever was going to sell him down the river, and said so; and she set him free in her will."[70] We have no further explanation of how Miss Watson came to that decision. But regardless of Miss Watson's moral reflection, Twain is pointing out the fundamental (and legal) truth of the matter: that *only* Miss Watson can free Jim. Whatever brought about Miss Watson's change of heart is not germane—what was necessary was that she have it, and that we see its necessity for Jim's freedom: in the eyes of the social order, Jim can never be free until Miss Watson says he is.

Despite its presentation as a children's novel, Twain's extraordinary decision to introduce a runaway slave as the protagonist's companion character almost dooms Huck's adventures to tragedy from the very beginning. The likelihood of Jim's successful escape is low, and the fact that Twain chose a raft floating downstream on the Mississippi River—deeper and deeper into slave country—as Huck and Jim's means of conveyance only lessens the chances that Jim will ever make it to freedom. Twain just as easily could have avoided the fog at Cairo altogether, had Huck and Jim turned north at the Ohio River, and carried on their adventures toward Pennsylvania. But instead, he put them on a raft and plunged them further into danger, so deep, in fact, that it became virtually impossible for them to escape.

The reason for this, I believe, is that Twain wants to draw our attention to the contemporaneous hopelessness of a satisfactory resolution to the institutionalized racism in the South. *Huckleberry Finn* laments that there is no way out of danger for the likes of Huck or Jim. What Miss Watson's decision to free Jim demonstrates is an ultimate truth, as Twain saw it, regarding race relations in the South, which was this: for there to be a peaceful transition to a more just and equitable future, it would have required, on the part of white Americans everywhere, a complete reversal in character, behavior, and attitude toward black Americans. In other words, it would take a miracle.[71]

The idea that the rights of black people in 19th century America ultimately depended on the willful capitulation of whites is anathema to contemporary academic liberalism, with echoes of the kind of white saviorism that just will not do in our current century. This is irrelevant to Twain's material. The axes of power, capital, and sheer brute force all aligned in favor of white people, making the notion

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[69] *HF* 57, 353.

[70] *HF* 357. Of course, Tom is also a bit of a scoundrel in his own right, so the reader can take his testimony as they will.

[71] Latin *mīrāculum* ("object of wonder"), from *mīror* ("to wonder at"), from *mīrus* ("wonderful"), from Proto-Indo-European *(s)meyh-* ("to smile, to be astonished"). It might be suggested that this "miracle" was what reflective judgment, when an actual narrative is imagined, can bring about—something incredible to behold.

that it could be "overcome" entirely against their will, in Twain's estimation, absurd. Instead, it underscores the immense challenges faced by those who dared to defy the status quo in pursuit of justice and equality, and the hopelessness of trying to move against such a force. Like its central motif and metaphor—the Mississippi River—it is a mighty and insurmountable force that can be navigated only very carefully. In terms of reflective judgment, however, the point is that the effect lies not in empirical force but in freedom of choice, no matter how rare it is.

Though Miss Watson's freeing of Jim in her will is a convenient plot device that spares the reader the unbearable thought of an ending in which Jim is returned to slavery, it is not merely that. It is also an uncomfortable commentary on the societal transformation required in 19th-century America, particularly in the South, and for that matter, continues to this day. Twain is suggesting here that for Black people to be treated with fairness, equality, and respect in the United States, there had to be a seismic shift in the moral consciousness—and the *sensus communis*—of white people everywhere. This kind of change of heart would require nothing less than a conversion of Pauline proportions, like that of the Apostle Paul, in the hearts and minds of every power broker in the South, and indeed, anyone with a stake in the plantation economy. By 1885, Twain saw that beating the South into oblivion was not enough to alter their entrenched prejudices. They were going to have to do some serious work on themselves to heal their culture and society—until then, all their pretenses toward respectability, gentility, and piousness rang as hollow as those priests who "dress the wounds of my people as though it were not serious, saying, 'Peace, peace!' when there is no peace."[72]

You got to go to the lonesome valley
You got to go there by yourself
Nobody else can go for you
You got to go there by yourself

You got to ask the Lord's forgiveness
Nobody else can ask Him for you

You got to go to the lonesome valley
You got to go there by yourself
Nobody else, nobody else can go for you
You got to go there by yourself[73]

Twain's project in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is not to prescribe definitive solutions to the societal issues he critiques. However, he does propose a starting point for addressing the racial problems that beleaguer the South, which is to strip away the pretense of societal roles in order to

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[72] Jer. 6:14; 8:11.

[73] Anonymous, "Lonesome Valley," American folk song. Recorded by Fairfield Four, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Original Motion Picture Soundtrack (2000). First recorded 1927 by David Miller.

engage with one another as human beings. Huck and Jim are never happier than when they are left alone, drifting down the river, talking under the stars.

> Sometimes we'd have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time. Yonder was the banks and the islands, across the water; and maybe a spark—which was a candle in a cabin window; and sometimes on the water you could see a spark or two—on a raft or a scow, you know; and maybe you could hear a fiddle or a song coming over from one of them crafts. It's lovely to live on a raft.[74]

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The central conflict in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* lies in the tension between Huck's capacity for reasoned reflective judgment—his common sense—and the societal norms that surround him. As an educational tool, the novel is fundamentally about this tension between one's ability to critically assess a situation and the societal narratives one has been taught. When faced with decisions of significant consequence, Huck often finds that his best judgment is at odds with the prevailing societal consensus, making it an exceptional educational tool for demonstrating *thinking for oneself* contra *sensus communis* without getting lost in theoretical sticking points. Narrated in the first person and replete with introspective monologues, *Huckleberry Finn* is primarily a narrative of personal reflection in the face of outlandish events and cruel societal conventions. Spared the burden of an overly ideological upbringing, Huck's decisions are grounded in practicality, empathy, and mercy. He makes practical, aesthetic judgments based on who is harmed by the events unfolding around him and what the nature and extent of that harm might be. His ethical decisions are not dictated by conventional standards of behavior but are derived from his ability to imagine himself in another's position.

Huck Finn's success as a coming-age-story cannot be understated; though the novel's action takes place over the course of just a few months in Huck's early adolescence, he does more growing and reflecting in that short period than most of us manage in a lifetime. This is owed in part to the material conditions of Huck's life, but to the fact that Huck really does not have much of a choice but to face head-on the most explosive issues of his century and of the century since. In fact, children of about Huck's age are the ideal audience for Twain's message. They are in a formative period, often internally questioning authority and societal norms but frequently unable to voice such questions freely. Children in the South, especially, would have witnessed all manners of horrors committed in the name of upholding the status quo while still attending church on Sundays. These readers, more than any, would have needed a signal that the daily horrors they observed *were*, in fact, horrors, that they *were* absurd; that they were *not* wrong to interrogate them; and that there were in fact others out there—Mark Twain being one of them—who could see it for what it was, too.

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[74] *HF* 158.

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